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Sourisseau Academy

Smith-Layton Archive

presents:

"Crate Label Art"

by Thomas Layton

Les Amis (The Friends)

photo collection

December 2014

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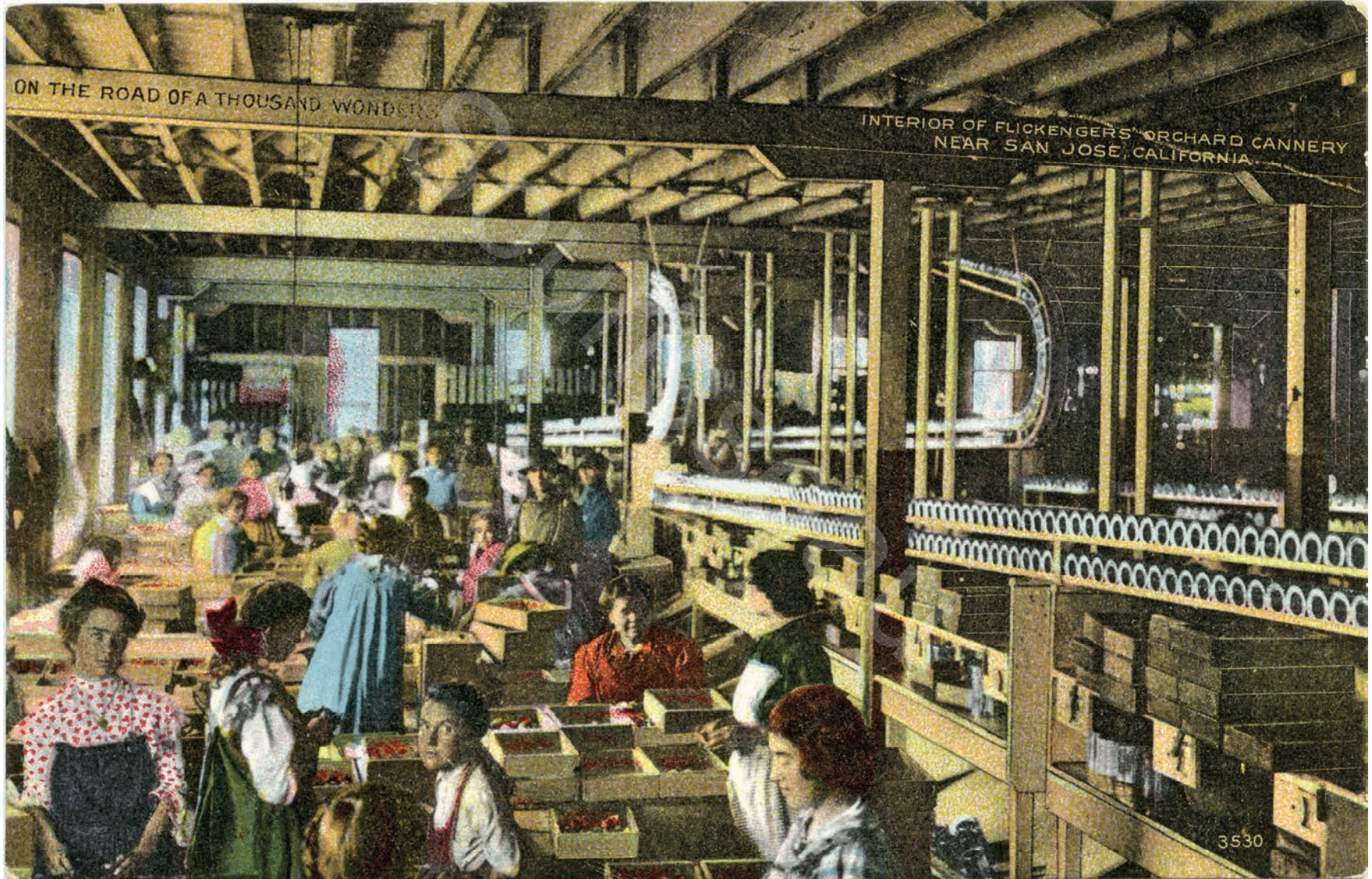
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A photo recently purchased by *Les Amis de Sourisseau!*
December, 2014



[99] From high atop Mount Hamilton, the golden eyes of Lick Observatory gaze down upon a moonlit Santa Clara Valley where McCurdy's U.S. No. 1 Pears were grown, harvested, wrapped and crated for shipment across the United States. But, why would a crate of Bartlett pears demand such an elaborate label? The answer: This label (printed by the Muirson Label Company of San Jose) was the progeny of the marriage of technology and marketing, a love affair that began in our Valley over a century ago. (Caption by Tom Layton)

A photo recently purchased by *Les Amis de Sourisseau!*
December, 2014



[100] The mechanization of canning and the availability of cheap railroad transport fueled a mass market for California fruit. In 1887, the J. H. Flickinger Company was among the first of many large-scale fruit processing plants to be established in the Santa Clara Valley. Meanwhile, advances in lithography enabled mass production of multicolored labels. Fruit packers, in competition for a burgeoning market, engaged in an "arms race" to design ever more magnificent labels. The result was a florescence of image and text that transcended the world — without ever achieving the dignity of "serious" art. (Caption by Tom Layton)

A photo recently purchased by *Les Amis de Sourisseau!*
December, 2014



[101] Initially, most Santa Clara Valley fruit packers used templates wet with black ink to stamp their names and locations onto the ends of their fruit crates — as seen on these crates from the Cherry Avenue Fruit Farm in Willow Glen. But soon, the larger companies began pasting multi-colored pictures onto their cans and crates, with depictions of luscious fruits set against fantastical scenic views. (Caption by Tom Layton)

A photo recently purchased by *Les Amis de Sourisseau!*
December, 2014



[102] When the San Jose Fruit Packing Company first began labeling their cans and crates, they thought it necessary to convince consumers of the safety and purity of their products, sealed in soldered cans — strong enough to withstand the assault of hungry grizzlies and a bald eagle! (Caption by Tom Layton)

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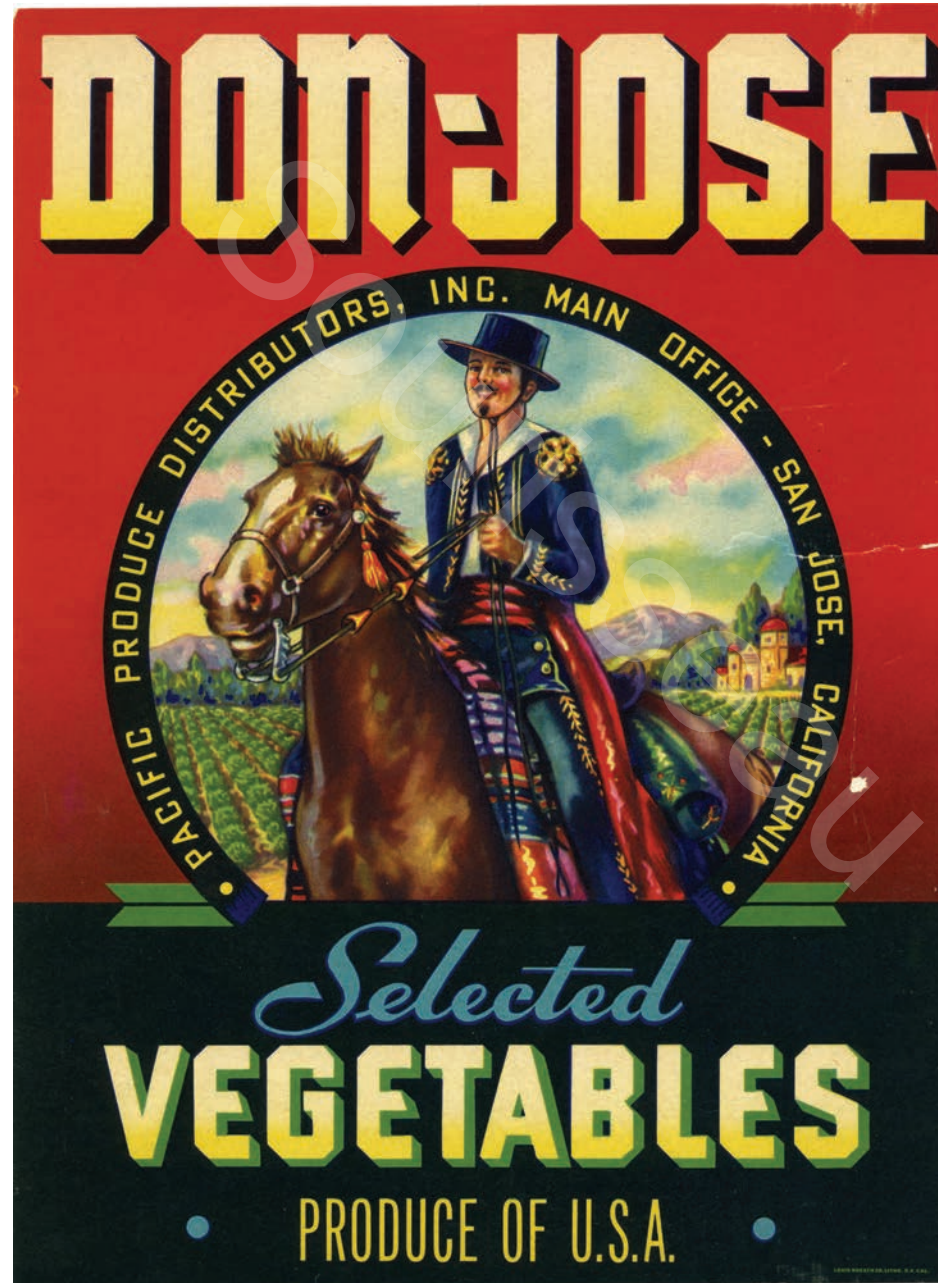
[103] By 1920, consumers had become accustomed to canned food, and large producers were now inventing memorable brand names to define their product lines. The Gallagher Fruit Company of San Jose developed the Embarcadero Brand and the Muirson Label Company designed and printed their label, featuring luscious golden pears set against both a verdant hillside orchard and a Venetian-style embarcadero — clearly not Alviso — with white seagulls fluttering over pale blue waters. (Caption by Tom Layton)

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[104] A cadre of unsung artists, many of them European immigrants mostly working for San Francisco lithographic firms, etched their mostly imaginary visions of the Santa Clara Valley onto Bavarian limestone slabs. Then, a corps of pressmen printed the large multi-label sheets, one color at a time, often for eight to twelve different colors. There was, however, one major lithographic firm in the Santa Clara Valley. From 1914-1970, the Muirson Label Company, where local artist Ralph Rambo worked for over fifty years (eventually as Art Director), supplied many local growers and canneries. This Clear Brook brand label, printed in 1920 for J.F. Pyle & Son of San Jose, presents a clear blue stream rushing through a vista of rolling hills, clearly contrived to create lasting visions of our valley in the minds of far distant consumers. (Caption by Tom Layton)

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[105] This dashing Californio rides across an idealized Santa Clara Valley, with what appears to be a European castle serving as a California mission. (Caption by Tom Layton)

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[106] Sometimes crate labels were designed in response to historic events. The discovery of King Tut's tomb in 1924 inspired a spate of Egyptianized art deco-themed designs, from clothing to theatre interiors. And it is widely believed that the LoBue Packing Company of San Jose was doubly inspired — sufficiently so, that Claudette Colbert's 1934 portrayal of Cleopatra may have provided the model for this magnificent Patricia brand crate label. (Caption by Tom Layton)

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[107] The Golden Age of crate labeling came to an end in the 1950s with the introduction of truly boring, pre-printed corrugated cardboard boxes such as these, photographed by Arnold Del Carlo at San Jose's Mayfair Packing Company. (Caption by Tom Layton)

A photo recently acquired by *Les Amis de Sourisseau!*
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[108] But we would never leave our loyal readers in the middle of winter on such a down-note. So, please gaze upon LoBue's Selected Santa Clara Valley Cherries, and be assured that only a few months from now, California's cherry trees will once again spring into blossom with all the magic and glory of long ago. (Caption by Tom Layton)